

The Fortress that became a Kingdom

Location



Ronda lies to the north west of Malaga and almost directly north of San Pedro de Alcantara (which is midway between San Pedro and Estepona). The drive from San Pedro takes about an hour even though the road distance is a mere 50km. The road leaves the coast and immediately begins to climb and turn, quickly reaching a height of 1300m. After this the road still twists and turns but loses height a little. The road itself is a feat of engineering and affords fantastic views looking south towards the north African coast and Gibraltar. Ronda is situated on a plateau at an altitude of 750m and this approach to the south of the city leads the traveller through the narrow streets of the old town, over the *Tajo de Ronda* bridge which spans a deep gorge that splits the city into two, and into the newer part of the city past the bullring and

up towards the bus and train stations at the north of the city. The deep gorge is around 500m in length, 100m deep and, at its broadest, 50m wide.

It is hard to put into words the feeling when seeing the gorge and the bridge for the first time. The view from the bridge across to the west in the general direction of Seville takes the breath away: it might be the snow and the frost in the winter; the hot air balloons from the nearby hot air balloon flight school sailing lazily across the sky in summer; or the colours of the fields in autumn. Nearby are the Cueva de la Pileta discovered in 1905 by a goatherd which has rock paintings and paleolithic remains dating back 25,000 years.

Climate

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature	15	17	20	24	27	32	36	36	32	26	20	16
Rainfall	73	59	90	51	36	9	1	5	25	66	68	76

History

The city has been gradually built on successive Roman and Moorish sites and now has a population of around 40,000. According to the chronicles, a Roman castle was built here on the site of a Celtic fortress, known as Arunda, in 122BC. Arunda suffered Germanic invasion, later coming under Byzantine rule. Moorish occupation and then Visigoth rule when its name was changed to Unda. The Moors conquered Unda in 711AD and was ruled by Zayde Ibn Kesadi Al-Sabsaki, who changed the name again: Izn-Rand Onda. A period of calm followed and the city became an independent kingdom. In 1232 the Kingdom of Granada was established and Ronda belonged to this realm until the ruler of Granada, Mohammed II, was forced to give up the city to the Sultan of Morocco. The Christian conquest of Ronda took place in 1485. The Moors were finally expelled from the area in 1609. In the c18 Ronda began to regain its sense of importance and the Spanish War of Independence was probably the turning point with the French forced out of the city in August 1812. With a potted history such as this, is it any wonder that the city is home to such a diverse array of buildings, monuments and character. The atmosphere of calm which surrounds the streets seems at odds with the centuries of struggle that have gone before.

Bridges

The *Tajo*, as the focus of the city, is an excellent place to start a day's walk-around. The current bridge is known as the New Bridge, and more than any other of the city's monuments is the best known and has become the symbol of the city. Construction began in 1751 and took 42 years to complete. In the middle, immediately below road level, is small room which used to be the town jail.

There are two other bridges over the Guadalevin – the Moorish Bridge and the Old Bridge. These are still in use and represent successive development of the city. Both are visible from the New Bridge looking to the east. The Moorish Bridge is furthest away and the lowest of the crossings.

The Moorish Bridge is at the beginning of the gorge and close by is the remains of the Moorish Baths. Although not perfectly conserved they are considered the most important of their kind in Spain. The baths have three rooms according to the temperature of the water: hot, lukewarm and cold. The ceiling is vaulted and has skylights in the form of stars.

The *Casa del Rey Moro*, the House of the Moorish King, is built high on the edge of the gorge and can be seen almost completely from the Old Bridge that spans the gorge a little higher up from the Moorish Bridge. The gardens of the *Casa del Rey* are open to the public and are outstanding. In the garden is a fresh water spring which supplied

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the town during sieges. The spring is reached by descending 365 steps carved into the rock.

The old town

Walking from the New Bridge south leads towards the Town Hall and Collegiate Church. This part of the city is the site of the original settlement and has the irregular labyrinth of steep, narrow and winding streets. It has the colour and taste of an Andalusian village, with whitewashed walls and balconies enclosed with intricate wrought-iron grilles and decked out with baskets of flowers. Iron-work gates offer views of cool tiled patios with fountains. This is a really tranquil part of the city and

the bustle of the main shopping area over on the other site of the *Tajo* seems far away. The Town Hall and Collegiate Church of Santa Maria la Naylor stand in the Plaza Duquesa de Parcent – the highest point of this old town district. The church stands on the site of a former mosque. The mosque was consecrated as a Christian place of worship after the conquest by the Catholic Monarchs. The tower contains remains of the mosque *mihrab*, with the horseshoe arch giving access to the holy ground. One side of the plaza is taken up with the Town Hall which at one time was a military barracks. A third side of the plaza is the Silesians' College. This is built on the site of the old Roman fortress which later became the Moorish *alcazaba*.